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## **Sport and the Sustainable Development Goals: Where is the policy coherence?**

**Iain Lindsey and Paul Darby**

### **Abstract**

This article addresses the urgent need for critical analysis of the relationships between sport and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) enshrined in the United Nations' global development framework, the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Importantly, there has yet to be any substantial academic exploration of the implications of the position accorded to sport as 'an important enabler' of the aims of *2030 Agenda* and its broad set of SDGs. In beginning to address this gap, we draw on the concept of policy coherence for two reasons. Firstly, the designation of a specific SDG Target for policy coherence is recognition of its centrality in working towards SDGs that are considered as 'integrated and indivisible'. Secondly, the concept of policy coherence is centred on a dualism that enables holistic examination of both synergies through which the contribution of sport to the SDGs can be enhanced as well as incoherencies by which sport may detract from such outcomes. Our analysis progresses through three examples that focus on the common orientation of the Sport for Development and Peace 'movement' towards education-orientated objectives aligned with SDG 4; potential synergies between sport participation policies and the SDG 3 Target for reducing non-communicable diseases; and practices within professional football in relation to several migration-related SDG Targets. These examples show the relevance of the SDGs across diverse sectors of the sport industry and illustrate complexities within and across countries that make pursuit of comprehensive policy coherence infeasible. Nevertheless, our analyses lead us to encourage both policy makers and researchers to continue to utilise the concept of policy coherence as a valuable lens to identify and consider factors that may enable and constrain various potential contributions of sport to a range of SDGs.

### **Introduction**

The United Nations General Assembly's adoption of Resolution 70/1 '*Transforming Our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*' in November 2015 represented a significant milestone for sport. The resolution set out a new framework for global development efforts, replacing the expired Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and 169 associated Targets, to be addressed through to 2030. While sport was not directly included under any of these SDGs, the opening declaration stated that:

Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development. We recognize the growing contribution of sport to the realization of development and peace in its promotion of tolerance and respect and the contributions it makes to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives. (UNGA, 2015: 10)

This was the first time that any overarching policy for global development included such a wide-ranging statement on sport and, as such, it represented recognition of the significant expansion in activity and advocacy associated with ‘Sport for Development and Peace’ (SDP) since the turn of the millennium. Although there has been a similarly rapid increase in academic interest in SDP over this period, there is as yet a lack of any published, academic analyses of relationships between sport and the SDGs. This article begins to address this important gap.

Two themes within the *2030 Agenda* that differentiate the SDGs from the MDGs are of particular relevance for their intersections with sport and our analysis through this article. First, in contrast to the MDGs which were directed towards the global South<sup>1</sup>, the SDGs are intended as a ‘universal’ set of aspirations, designed to have relevance across the ‘entire world, developed and developing countries alike’ (UNGA, 2015: 3). This geographic broadening is represented in a set of SDGs and Targets that expand upon the MDGs, not only in number but also in their individual and collective scope. Issues such as education, health and gender empowerment, that have occupied a prominent position within policies, practices and research associated with SDP, remain strongly represented in the *2030 Agenda* and are the focus of specific but broadly conceived SDGs. On the other hand, other SDGs and Targets associated with discrimination against women (SDG 5.1), abuse and violence against children (SDG 16.2) and corruption and bribery (SDG 16.5), for example, are amongst those that draw existing problems within sport firmly into the realm of the global development policy framework. The agendas now encompassed by these universal SDGs therefore have

significant implications not just within SDP but for and across sport more broadly. As a result, there is a need for expanded analysis of the ways in which the SDGs and associated Targets bring into focus the policies, practices and impacts of a wider array of sporting bodies, organisations and stakeholders to a far greater extent than has previously been considered.

Second, the intention that the SDGs are ‘integrated and indivisible’ is given significant and repeated prominence within the *2030 Agenda*. Individual MDGs were, by contrast, tightly focused and relatively discrete. The altered emphasis on the ‘many cross-cutting elements’ across the SDGs and associated Targets (UNGA, 2015: 6) has particular relevance for sport and is representative of something of an existing paradox. On the one hand, policy documents and academic analyses have focused on classifications of potential contributions of sport to discrete MDGs (or other, similar classifications of potential outcomes) (e.g. UNOSDP, 2011; Kay and Dudfield, 2013; Schulenkorf et al., 2016) and SDP projects have similarly been urged to focus on specific and clearly defined objectives (e.g. SDPIWG, 2008; Coalter, 2010). On the other hand, ongoing advocacy for sport has sought to position it as a cross-cutting tool across different development agendas (SDPIWG, 2008; Kay and Dudfield, 2013). While some sociologically-orientated research on SDP practice has implicitly considered this paradox (e.g. Lindsey et al., 2017), there has been very limited analysis of its antecedents in sport and development policy. The ‘integrated and indivisible’ discourse explicit in the *2030 Agenda* emphasises the need to address this gap, and to identify and examine the relevance of multiple intersections across sport and different SDGs and Targets.

To develop these arguments, we draw specifically on the concept of policy coherence. This concept has particular applicability as there is a repeatedly stated aspiration within the *2030 Agenda* and a specific SDG Target (17.14) to ‘enhance policy coherence for sustainable

development' (UNGA, 2015). This, in turn, reflects the relevance of seeking coherence across multiple policies and domains given the conception of the SDGs as universal, integrated and indivisible. However, there is little explicit elaboration in the *2030 Agenda* as to what policy coherence may specifically entail or how it may be achieved (Deacon, 2016) and so there is a need to draw on analyses and applications of the concept elsewhere in both global development policies and academic literature. Specifically stated definitions of policy coherence vary somewhat across such sources, but do share a common alignment with the central perspective offered by Ashoff (2005: 11) that:

The term "policy coherence" is used in two senses ... on the negative side, it means the absence [removal] of incoherencies, i.e. of inconsistencies between and the mutual impairment of different policies. ... on the positive side, it means the interaction of policies with a view to achieving overriding objectives.

In line with the dualism in this statement, the terminology of incoherencies and synergies to respectively reflect contradictory or complementary aspects of different policies is common within the literature on policy coherence. This definitional distinction, and the more detailed and critical review of policy coherence that follows in the next section, is therefore central to our use of the concept as a lens to identify and examine implications of the intersections between sport and the SDGs. Thereafter, the article proceeds by exploring three distinct examples that were specifically identified as being suitable for enabling examination of both potential synergies and incoherencies between sport and particular SDGs. Firstly, we focus on the centrality of educational activities within SDP and examine the possibilities for enhancing policy coherence in respect of SDG Targets related both to education specifically and other outcomes that education may contribute to. Secondly, we analyse the potential for

policy coherence that improves synergies between efforts to increase participation in sport and specific SDG Targets associated with non-communicable diseases. Finally, we explore an issue (sports-related migration) that has rarely been considered in policies or debates pertaining to the potential for sport to contribute to development, but which illustrates existing policy incoherencies that come to the fore as a result of the broadened orientation of the SDGs.

These examples have, therefore, been purposively selected to enable examination of the significance of the SDGs and issues of policy coherence, not only within the identifiable SDP ‘movement’ (Giulianotti, 2011), but also across other aspects and stakeholders encompassed in the sport industry more broadly. This is not to suggest that these examples are exhaustive, either in the exposition accorded to each or in terms of encompassing the scope of all intersections between sport and the SDGs. Initially, our entry point into analysing each specific example was our own long-standing expertise drawn from researching multiple policy areas associated with sport and development across contexts in the global South and global North. Thereafter, we substantively developed our analysis through re-examining and synthesising key academic literature relevant to each example in respect of the conceptualisation of, and existing research on, policy coherence. This, in turn, led us to considering both overarching possibilities and limitations of sport in respect of the SDGs that are presented in the conclusion to the article, alongside recognition of implications of our novel application of policy coherence for future academic analysis in this field.

### **Conceptualising and Problematising Policy Coherence**

The concept of policy coherence initially rose to prominence in international development in the mid-2000s as it began to feature in the policies of a range of multinational agencies primarily representing Northern donor countries, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), its Development Assistance Committee

and the European Union (Barry et al., 2010; Verschaeve et al., 2016). These organisations initially tended to frame policy coherence in a narrow and negative way, focused on addressing intentional and unintentional ‘incoherencies’ across the policies and institutions of Northern donor countries (Sianes, 2017). Such contradictions prominently included, for example, the detrimental effects of donor countries’ trade policies on the desired outcomes that were otherwise central to their own international development policies. The early formulations of policy coherence, therefore, sought better development outcomes in countries of the global South primarily through seeking to counter problems that originated in divergent and ‘incoherent’ policies adopted amongst and within Northern donor governments.

Over time, conceptualisations of policy coherence have expanded beyond its earlier negative framing and its relevance only to donor countries in the global North. Recognition of the importance of enhancing complementary ‘synergies’ between different policies is but one facet of the broadened understanding of policy coherence that has subsequently emerged in both development policy documents and in related academic contributions (Knoll, 2014). Policy coherence has also increasingly been portrayed as a multi-level concept, ‘vertically’ applicable across global, international, national and sub-national policies and across the full range of countries that may be involved with or affected by development agendas (Dubé et al., 2014; OECD, 2016). Further, consideration of the ‘horizontal’ coherence of policy implementation has expanded to encompass private and civil society organisations as well as institutions in the public sector (Janus et al., 2015; OECD, 2016). These expansions in the conception of policy coherence reflect our increasingly ‘globalised world in which the boundaries between different policy areas and levels have become blurred’ (Verschaeve et al., 2016: 45). More particularly, and as indicated in our introduction, these broadened conceptions of policy coherence are well aligned with the change from the narrow

geographical and aspirational scope of the MDGs to the universal and wide-ranging aims of the SDGs (Knoll, 2014).

Nevertheless, there has been recognition in academic and grey literature of a number of significant issues and challenges in achieving policy coherence. Identification and understanding of existing incoherencies and/or potential synergies is a ‘necessary precondition’ for improving policy coherence (Ashoff, 2005). This presents a significant technical challenge in identifying (or predicting) causal links between different policies and evidencing their interrelated impacts (Barry et al., 2010; King, 2016). Considering the respective impact of different policies is not only technically challenging but is also inherently political (Ashoff, 2005; Verschaeve et al., 2016). For example, Dubé et al. (2014) indicate that contradictions between policies that have been recognised as ‘incoherencies’ may well reflect political prioritisation of other policy goals over those associated with development. More broadly, policy coherence and development can be influenced and contested by multiple stakeholders, each with their own interests and differing relations of power (Knoll, 2014; Verschaeve et al., 2016). Even if policy goals are mutually and coherently agreed, different implementation processes enacted by different organisations, institutions and stakeholders may also inhibit the achievement of policy coherence (Sianes, 2017).

The complexity of addressing such challenges in respect of the *2030 Agenda* specifically has been heightened by the expansive and interrelated nature of the SDGs and their associated Targets. Le Blanc’s (2015) analysis of SDG Targets revealed a complex web of associations, with 56% of them ‘explicitly refer[ing] to at least one other goal than the one to which they belong’ (p178). More specific analyses undertaken concerning health and the SDGs further illustrate this complexity and the numerous interconnections across the *2030 Agenda*. Summarising these, Nunes et al. (2016) recognise both the importance of various



SDGs in contributing to the health-specific SDG 3 and the varied contributions that improving health can make to other SDGs. As both Le Blanc (2015) and Nunes et al. (2016) conclude, this makes policy coherence more complicated and challenging. In addressing these complexities and challenges, Knoll (2014) argues for further focussed analysis of policy coherence in respect to specific thematic issues. It is in this regard that we analyse particular issues associated with sport and specific SDGs Targets in the following three examples that each and collectively allow consideration of the extent to which policy coherence is possible, worth pursuing and likely to elicit progress towards the aspirations of the *2030 Agenda*.

### **SDP and Education-Orientated Approaches to Development**

Our analysis of policy coherence across sport and the SDGs begins with an example focused on education because, as Rossi and Jeanes (2016: 493) recognise, ‘educational elements of SfD [Sport for Development]<sup>2</sup> are central to the movement’s ability to contribute to sustainable development’. Just as it is in SDP, so education is also a central concern across the *2030 Agenda* and in SDG 4, in particular, which seeks to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (UNGA, 2015: 14). The MDGs’ narrower focus on enrolment in formal education certainly remains within the scope of the new SDG 4, as would aligned practices which use sport as a ‘flypaper’ to encourage attendance amongst disengaged pupils (Coalter, 2010). However, the broader orientation of SDG Target 4.1 towards ‘relevant and effective learning outcomes’ from primary and secondary education enables recognition of further potential synergies between sport-related activities and the *2030 Agenda*. For example, the orientation of Target 4.1 may be interpreted as inclusive of both curricular Physical Education as well as other sport-based interventions in schools that seek to make alternative contributions to aspects of pupils’ learning and development. Further, the significant proportion of community-based SDP projects that use

adapted and augmented sporting activities to contribute to educational outcomes (Coalter, 2010) now has greater alignment with global development policy given that SDG 4 values a broad range of skills and knowledges. SDG Target 4.7, in particular, has relevance beyond formal education in promoting a broader conception of ‘education for sustainable development’ that includes elements such as sustainable lifestyles, citizenship, gender equity, peace and human rights (UNGA, 2015: 17) that have all, in different cases and contexts, been amongst the ‘life skills’ that SDP activities have sought to develop.

Hypothetically therefore, SDG 4 provides a global policy agenda that a broader array of SDP policies and organisations can be coherently aligned with. Further optimism may be taken from changes in the *2030 Agenda* that may mitigate Spaaij et al.’s (2016) claim that the prescriptive specificity of the MDGs compromised the capacity of donor-funded SDP programmes to address local educational needs in different contexts in the global South. Instead, the *2030 Agenda* prioritises processes of national policy making and adaption that may enable more localised specification of the ‘relevant’ skills, knowledge and learning outcomes to which SDG 4 is broadly orientated. If so, alignment with country-specific priorities for educational outcomes could conceivably enable SDP projects to develop a greater emphasis on the development of local forms of knowledge, as has commonly been advocated in the literature (Kay, 2012; Lindsey et al., 2017).

With educational-focused elements of SDP often enacted in pursuit of other development objectives (Spaaij et al., 2016), it is also necessary to consider the possibilities of policy coherence with other SDGs and Targets. To give but a few examples, educational SDP activities have been orientated towards combatting HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases (SDG Target 3.3), reducing alcohol and drug abuse (SDG Target 3.5), developing leadership amongst girls and women (SDG Target 5.5) and promoting entrepreneurship, enterprise and employment (SDG Targets 8.3 and 8.5). This is not to say that the *2030*

*Agenda* gives scope for specific educationally-orientated SDP projects to address all of these Targets and/or others that may also be relevant. Rather, we would again argue that there is greater scope to specifically orientate educational activities within SDP towards particular SDG Targets as they are differentially relevant within respective national policies and local contexts. Such alignment could also enable improved engagement with potential partner organisations from other sectors. For example, in respect of the SDG 8 Targets highlighted above, improved links with local employers and training providers in other industries could help to enhance pathways that support young people into employment and thus address a limitation of some current SDP projects (Lindsey et al., 2017).

Seeking to enhance policy coherence between SDP and SDG Targets for employment may, however, serve to reproduce the common critique of education-focused SDP projects, namely that they encourage individualised forms of knowledge and behaviour that conform to dominant neoliberal ideologies (Darnell, 2012; Hayhurst, 2014). Thus, as Thede (2013) argues of the pursuit of policy coherence more broadly, increased alignment with some SDG Targets identified in this and other examples may only further embed, rather than challenge, the influence of neoliberal models of development that can be found in SDP. Proponents of more critical, collective and transformative educational pedagogies within SDP (e.g. Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011; Spaaij et al., 2016) may also take little encouragement from the continuation of quantitative approaches to measuring development progress that are prevalent within the *2030 Agenda*. Nevertheless, Rossi and Jeanes (2016) argue that the potential of education-orientated SDP projects to enable individual young people to survive or even progress within neoliberal conditions of inequality should not be entirely discounted. We do not wish to be overly speculative or to overlook what the critical literature on SDP tells us about the neoliberal impulses that can undergird SDP policy and practice (Darnell, 2012). However, it is plausible that policy makers influencing SDP may, and indeed should in our

view, seek to adopt nuanced and pragmatic approaches, prioritising SDGs and Targets that, in particular contexts, enable greatest opportunities for balancing and aligning individual and structural change.

This example, therefore, clearly reveals both the possibilities and limitations of seeking policy coherence between SDP and a range of SDGs and Targets that are directly associated with, and may potentially be addressed through education. These synergies may be feasibly and best pursued through flexible SDP policies that allow for coherent alignment of educative SDP projects and activities with desired development outcomes that are in tune with local conditions, aspirations and needs. Emphasising such flexibility is not to suggest a lack of clarity or specificity in SDP policy and practice. Rather, the example indicates the importance of rigorous analysis of causal mechanisms by which particular sport-based educational activities may contribute to SDG 4 Targets and, in turn, to components of other SDGs. The existence or possibilities of developing pathways through which participants may have opportunities for employment or for alternative utilisation of skills and knowledge gained through SDP would be an important factor for consideration in this analysis. The example thus emphasises the importance and potential benefits of, what we term as, ‘downstream’ coherence – aligning and developing integration with policies and organisations in those sectors associated with the development goals that SDP seeks to contribute to. The practical achievement of such ‘downstream’ synergies is undoubtedly challenging. More critically, working towards policy coherence in these ways may do little to enable educative SDP projects to challenge broader structures of power and inequality. Given similar arguments about the SDGs themselves (Deacon, 2016), there should be recognition that seeking policy coherence may come with the danger of further incorporating SDP within systems of globalised neoliberalism.

## **Sport, Physical Inactivity and Health**

The universal and holistic conceptions of health and well-being encompassed in SDG 3 represent a paradigm shift from the more specific health-related MDGs which focused narrowly on issues of child mortality, maternal health, HIV / AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. SDG Target 3.4 particularly reflects this broadened agenda in seeking to ‘reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being’ (UNGA, 2015: 16). As stated, this Target particularly responds to health problems that have risen in prominence since the publication of the MDGs and significantly affect countries across both the global South and North.

Considering policy coherence in relation to this Target is, therefore, especially relevant as widely-articulated and widely-implemented rationales for sport, as well as SDP, have now been brought firmly within the scope of global development policy. Global and national sport-orientated policies have commonly justified efforts to increase participation in sport and other forms of active recreation based on evidence that regular physical activity reduces risks of a variety of non-communicable diseases (Nicholson et al., 2010). These policies also commonly reflect the importance of ‘scaled’ policy approaches that respond to the extent of physical inactivity and widespread prevalence of non-communicable diseases (World Health Organisation, 2014; Reis et al., 2016). ‘Scaled’ impact is likely beyond the capacity of SDP projects alone, given that they are often individually localised in scope and piecemeal in coverage collectively (Lindsey, 2016). A more significant ‘scaled’ impact towards SDG Target 3.4 would also require contributions from a far wider range of institutions and organisations whose responsibilities span sport and active recreation more broadly. While the previous example considered the importance of in-depth and localised approaches specifically associated with SDP, our selection of this specific example therefore enables exploration of policy coherence implications that alternatively derive from the

importance of ‘scaling up’ sport-based contributions towards reducing non-communicable diseases.

The challenge of ‘scale’ points to the relevance of potential synergies with other SDGs and Targets that may be considered ‘upstream’ of sport and active recreation – that is, those that may facilitate or constrain efforts to increase population-wide levels of participation and physical activity. As a prime example, the importance of physical education in formal schooling has been advocated by policy makers and academics for its contribution to young people’s development of physical literacy which, in turn, can potentially enhance the likelihood of life-long participation in sport and active recreation (Whitehead, 2010; UNESCO, 2015). Unlike predominantly civil society-based SDP (Guilianotti, 2011), physical education as a curriculum subject resides within the remit of public education policies and systems. Implementation is, however, a significant problem with UNESCO’s (2013) *World-wide Survey of School Physical Education* finding that physical education is not implemented in accordance with nationally-mandated requirements in almost a third of countries, with particular deficiencies identified in the context of primary schools where physical literacy can be initially developed. While addressing these limitations in physical education implementation would represent a form of policy coherence, it is important to recognise that any potential effects of such synergies on rates of non-communicable disease and, ultimately, the SDG Target of reducing premature mortality could only be realised in the longer-term, beyond the period of the *2030 Agenda* itself. Moreover, there are numerous intervening factors that may disrupt, or even undermine, the lengthy causal chain from improved physical education to reduced non-communicable diseases that is often presumed by policy makers (Green, 2014). Such factors would have to be additionally encompassed in order to develop a more comprehensive and effective form of policy coherence for SDG Target 3.4.

The provision of appropriate physical infrastructure and facilities is one such factor that may affect long-term participation in sport and active recreation, and hence any potential contribution to reducing non-communicable diseases (Nicholson et al., 2010). Compared to the impact of specific sport and SDP programmes, policies that ensure that physical environments are conducive to participation and physical activity can have long-term and population-level impacts for health (Kaczynski and Henderson, 2007). On the other hand, and in many contexts, processes of urbanisation and population growth in cities may threaten access to appropriate facilities for sport, active recreation and physical activity (Akindes and Kirwan, 2009). Again, this is an issue that has relevance within the expanded scope of the *2030 Agenda*, particularly in SDG 11 which has an overall focus on ‘cities and human settlements’ and includes a specific Target (11.7) for ‘universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces’. Efforts to develop policy coherence across urban planning, sport, physical activity and health may also draw on the commitment in SDG Target 11.3 to ‘participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management’. In practice, however, traditions of limited understanding and integration between sport and urban planning policies and stakeholders across national and local levels are likely to present a significant challenge to policy coherence in many locations (Davies, 2016).

Any aspirations for achieving the types of policy coherence suggested here should also be tempered by a recognition of factors associated with other SDGs that may preclude, or at least hinder, population-level increases in participation in sport and active recreation and the accrual of associated health benefits. First, it is important to recognise the importance of recent critiques that suggest that promotion of competitive and organised forms of sport alone may not be an effective or efficient policy response to the prevalence of non-communicable diseases (Weed, 2016). Nevertheless, and irrespective of distinctions between sport and

active recreation, Coalter's (2013: 3) analysis of the constraints of broader social and economic inequalities that exist in many countries and contexts leads him to argue 'that the achievement of substantially higher sports participation rates is well beyond the control of sports policy'. Similar arguments can derive from research in numerous countries that demonstrates policies for sport and active recreation may have limited influence in combatting the detrimental effects of poverty on participation rates (Collins and Kay, 2014; Haudenhuyse, 2015). Following this line of argument, progress towards SDGs 1 and 10, that address poverty and inequality respectively, appears to be a prerequisite without which any efforts towards the types of policy coherence for sport and health identified earlier in this example may have constrained impact.

Overall, our analysis of policy coherence with respect to addressing non-communicable diseases (SDG Target 3.4) enables identification of similarities with, but also important distinctions from, the previous education-orientated example. Considerations of scaled impact within this example move the locus of attention even more firmly onto sport in general, rather than SDP specifically. The example is also distinctive in highlighting the relevance of 'upstream' factors and policies, in this case associated with public education and urban planning sectors, that can affect the potential contribution of sport to development goals. Responsibilities within these sectors may be differentially distributed, as in the previous example, across national and sub-national governmental authorities, with the consequence that different approaches to multi-level policy coherence for health and education may be relevant according to specific government systems in individual countries. The two examples are also similar in respect of the multiple interconnections between sport and different SDGs and Targets, reinforcing the importance of identifying causal chains between different policies, their impacts and consequences for any progress towards policy coherence. Such analysis, nevertheless, brings attention to the extent to which structural



conditions of inequality and poverty can constrain potential contributions of sport to the SDGs, irrespective of any progress towards other aspects of policy coherence. That such structural constraints exist across, as well as within, nations begins to suggest the need for further consideration of international dimensions of policy coherence. We explore the following example of sport-related migration in order to bring such international dimensions to the fore. In doing so, the following example also distinctively enables consideration of the extent to which existing policy incoherencies related to professional sport may actually mitigate against aspirations encompassed in the *2030 Agenda*.

### **Sport and the migration-development nexus**

The inclusion of a migration-specific and several migration-related Targets in the SDGs has, for the first time, formally entrenched migration in the mainstream development agenda. Despite decades of polemicizing around its developmental impact (De Haas, 2010), migration had previously been omitted from mainstream development policies and most notably from the MDGs, save for a cursory mention of respect for and protection of migrants' human rights (UNGA, 2001). An exponential growth in remittances in the new millennium and associated lobbying, primarily by civil society organisations, has since paved the way for the institutionalisation of migration within the *2030 Agenda* (Bakewell, 2011). A headline migration Target (10.7) to 'facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies' was included as part of SDG 10 which broadly aims to reduce inequality within and among countries (UNGA, 2015: 21). The incorporation of related Targets around protecting migrant labour rights, eradicating forced labour and human trafficking (Targets 8.7 and 8.8) and maximising the benefits of migrant remittances for their countries of origin (Target 10.c) firmly positions migration, the well-being of migrants and protection of migrant

workers' rights within the *2030 Agenda*. The inclusion of these Targets coupled with the positioning of sport as an 'important enabler' of sustainable development raises important questions about the extent and possibilities of policy coherence across sport migration and these SDG Targets.

Football constitutes a particularly instructive case for considering these questions. The professional game and transnational migrant labour go hand in hand and a significant proportion of migratory flows in this industry are from the global South to the North (Poli et al., 2016a). Because of this geographical patterning, football migration has come to be understood as a cause and outcome of development and/or underdevelopment (Bale, 2004; Darby, 2012, 2013; Darby et al., 2007; Esson 2015a) and, depending on one's position in this debate, it is constitutive of both the possibilities and limitations of alignment between professional football and the *2030 Agenda*. In terms of the former, access to and mobility within what can be a highly lucrative career can facilitate development at the individual level, and the common practice of migrant players remitting part of their salaries and engaging in philanthropic activities to support their families and local communities at home can contribute to collective forms of development (Darby, 2012). Envisaging transnationally mobile athletes as remittance producing agents of sustainable development clearly chimes with the general thrust of the migration-related SDG Targets. However, accruing developmental gains from sports migration, and migration more generally, is dependent on coherent policy making that protects migrant labour rights, eradicates trafficking and maximises opportunities for players to acquire the sort of sustainable economic livelihoods that enable regular remitting. Instead, efforts to develop effective policy and regulation around the international trade in football labour, and particularly of young players, have been consistently undermined by the deeply neoliberal and highly commodified character of the

football industry and an often ruthless disregard for the welfare of actual or aspiring migrant professionals (Carter, 2011).

It is important to acknowledge that there are a range of social, cultural and economic push and pull factors that inform players' decisions to seek out careers overseas and these individuals and their family members make considered, strategic choices about whether and how best to pursue this career route. Furthermore, not all migrant players are passive victims who are simply moved by the vagaries of the human resource requirements of the football industry and nor are they necessarily at risk of trafficking or unethical management (Darby and Van Der Meij, forthcoming). Nonetheless, the football industry provides often precarious work and this is particularly the case for young migrants from Africa and South America (Agergaard and Ungruhe, 2016; Van der Meij et al., 2017; Meneses, 2013). Careers in the game are generally short, especially for those who move prematurely (Poli et al, 2016b). Outside the higher echelons of the more lucrative leagues in England, Italy, Spain, France and Germany, salaries are modest at best (Poli, 2006; FIFPro, 2016). Despite this, increasing numbers of young people are investing in football-related migratory projects, especially through an expanding and diverse academy system. However, irrespective of whether they enter well structured, 'official' academies run by clubs in Europe and in the global South or more informal and localised set ups, the outcome is typically involuntary immobility (Van der Meij et al., 2017). Furthermore, the rights of children are often at risk and sometimes infringed during their engagement with the professional football industry (Drywood, 2016). The scale of these problems are well recognised but difficult to accurately measure or evaluate, and even harder to weigh up against any positive benefits that may accrue for a minority of migrants. Nevertheless, it is clear that it would be erroneous to consider football migration as a panacea for poverty or a secure route to sustainable development. Indeed, there are aspects of the trans-continental trade in football labour that have emerged over the last

two decades that can bring about the opposite. Chief amongst these are football related trafficking and exploitative work practices involving footballers from the global South (Esson, 2015b; Hawkins, 2016), two of the issues that the SDG Targets explicitly identify as mitigating against developmental outcomes from migration.

In considering whether more coherent policies could address trafficking and exploitative work practices in this industry, Esson's distinction between trafficking *through* and *in* football is instructive (Esson, 2015b). The former relates to criminal activities by individuals, posing as football scouts or agents, who promise football trials overseas to fraudulently extract money, often as much as £3,000, from the parents of young players. This process involves the player being taken to Europe, or more recently to south and east Asia, before being abandoned. Trafficking *in* football involves a similar route but trials do materialise and professional contracts are secured. What allows this process to be defined as trafficking is that these contracts are often highly exploitative and unfavourable for the labourer with agents taking as much as 50% of the salary for the duration of the contract. Trafficking *through* football involves criminal activity and as such requires an appropriate response from the relevant national crime and border control agencies. Working collectively and ensuring policy coherence between these agencies and relevant football authorities would clearly be beneficial in tackling this issue. On the other hand, responsibility for addressing trafficking *in* football and ameliorating the other characteristics of football migration that make it precarious and exploitative falls within the purview of the football authorities at international, regional and national levels.

To date, the policy response of FIFA, encapsulated in international transfer regulations introduced in 2001 can be read as well intentioned. Their imposition of an age limit of 18 for international transfers or 16 in the EU in particular circumstances seeks to minimise the potential for trafficking or exploiting young players. As such, the policy

framework around international transfers appears to be in keeping with the spirit of the migration-related SDG Targets of facilitating orderly, safe, and responsible migration, protecting the rights and well-being of migrants and eradicating human trafficking. While this correlation is unintentional, it is suggestive of potential avenues towards policy coherence between the football industry and mainstream development agendas. However, the activities of football clubs around the world but particularly in Europe, in seeking out competitive advantage and loopholes in these regulations, combined with European-wide rules on ‘home-grown’ players and inconsistent national policies on the minimum age at which players can sign professional contracts, have inadvertently increased precarity for young migrant players (Rowe, 2016). Indeed, the number of international transfers involving minors has steadily increased with a record 2,323 registered in 2015 (ibid).

FIFA’s policy response to this has been contradictory. In 2015, it lowered the age at which an international transfer certificate is required from 12 to 10 in order to extend the protections offered by its transfer regulations to younger minors. However, later the same month, FIFA effectively deregulated the transfer market by ending its licensing scheme for player agents. Oversight of ‘intermediaries’ who broker player transfers was passed on to national associations leading to fears that this will create a ‘wild west’ scenario in football, particularly in the global South where federations have less capacity for providing this oversight (Riach, 2015). Given increasing concerns about football trafficking and in light of the SDG Targets that pertain to ‘orderly’ migration and migrant protection, this form of international deregulation appears counter-intuitive. It also reveals the current absence of policy coherence between the football industry and other agencies and institutions that might ameliorate some of the issues associated with international transfers. Drywood (2016), for example, has argued that the EU, working alongside the football industry, should be more

active in this field, given its role in liberalising the transfer system through the *Bosman* case and its broader commitment to children's rights.

However, as with migration more generally, when tighter controls on football migration are applied without addressing the wider global inequalities that help to sustain it, aspirations for spatial mobility can become more acute and the possibility of exploitation or trafficking more pronounced. As Esson's (2015a) work on male youth in West Africa has illustrated, pursuing transnational football migration, even if it occurs through irregular channels or has little chance of resulting in a sustained career in professional football, is considered a risk worth taking. Starkly put, in a context where neoliberal policies have constrained opportunities for secure and sustainable economic livelihoods, seeking to enhance policy coherence through increased regulation, however well-intentioned, is unlikely to deter young footballers from chasing their dreams or make the processes involved more 'orderly' or 'safer' (Esson, 2015b; Hawkins 2016).

There are also questions about whether it is even desirable to read mobile, professional athletes as remittance producing, growth-related development actors or to view sports migration as a potential contributor to sustainable development. As Suliman (2017) has argued of migrants more generally, by reducing them to remitters, the SDG Targets depoliticise migration by ignoring its structural causes and its relationship with inequality, and leaves unchallenged a version of development that locates responsibility for it at the level of the individual. Thus, reducing transnational sports migrants in the same manner might conceivably further depoliticise or deflect attention away from the causal relationship between global inequality and migration. This would be another problematic outcome of a mechanistic coupling of sports migration to the *2030 Agenda*. In short, any steps that seek to enhance policy coherence so as to maximise the potential for sports migrants to contribute to sustainable development in their country of departure is likely to be limited if it is not

combined with progress on reducing the very same global inequalities that necessitate migration in the first place.

## **Conclusions**

The use of policy coherence as a conceptual lens in this article has enabled illustration of important intersections between sport, particular SDGs and the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* more generally. This undertaking is significant for both mainstream development and sport. In terms of the implications for the former, policy coherence is cited as a specific Target within the SDGs and is considered crucial to the effective pursuit of sustainable development. This, coupled with the wider shift in global development policy from a relatively discrete set of MDGs to a ‘universal, indivisible and interlinked’ framework, makes exploring the potential for coherence between different sectors and policies an important exercise. For sport and SDP, enhancing policy coherence brings the potential for realising a widely held and oft-articulated aspiration (e.g. Darnell and Black, 2011; Kay and Dudfield, 2013) for greater recognition and acceptance within mainstream development sectors.

While there may appear to be potential for policies across sport and other development sectors to interact in ways that contribute to the overriding aims of the *2030 Agenda*, achieving policy coherence is an altogether different matter. The expanded scope of the SDGs means that there is a need for careful consideration of both potential synergies and existing incoherencies that may respectively enhance and weaken the contribution of sport to sustainable development. The examples we discuss begin to illustrate the complexities of doing so, as they differentially demonstrate that enhancing policy coherence may involve stakeholders from what may be considered as the SDP ‘movement’ and from across grassroots to elite and professional sport. The relevance of both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’

dimensions of policy coherence also adds to this complexity – the first two examples particularly illustrate how enhancing policy coherence may require within-country alignment and relationships between sport and other policy sectors, while the third example strongly emphasises the importance of addressing internationally-orientated policy incoherencies.

In acknowledging considerable complexities and challenges, we are not suggesting that moves towards policy coherence should be abandoned but, rather, that there is a need for recognition that ‘complete’ or ‘comprehensive’ policy coherence in respect of sport and the SDGs is most likely infeasible. As a consequence of this conclusion, we would argue that the concept of policy coherence has particular value in drawing attention to some fundamental choices and questions regarding priorities and possibilities for progress. For example, what degree of attention and impetus should be respectively accorded to reducing incoherencies or enhancing synergies between sport and various aspects of the *2030 Agenda*? How should the determination of sport policy priorities take account of differing issues of development need, the evidence-base on sport and development, and the practical feasibility of progress towards particular SDGs? These are not simple questions with ready answers, but we would argue that identifying them through the lens of policy coherence is important, not least because they have yet to be substantively considered in debates on SDP. Moreover, our three examples allow us to respond to these questions by drawing out some key considerations of value for those seeking to enhance policy coherence across sport and the *2030 Agenda*.

In the respect of the first of our two questions, the example of sport-related migration clearly demonstrates the potential for contradictory trade-offs between different SDG Targets that alternatively focus on enhancing the benefits of migration and protecting the rights of (potential) migrants themselves. The protection of human rights are reaffirmed throughout the *2030 Agenda* (Pogge and Sengupta 2016), and we would argue that policy coherence demands that such universal principles should not be undermined by giving greater emphasis



to the potential of sport as an instrumental tool towards other relevant SDG Targets. The significance of such a conclusion is only heightened by recognition of other specific rights-based SDGs and Targets, such as those addressing violence against women (5.2) and children (16.2), that have particular relevance across sport.

Beyond universal principles, there is a need for contextually-relevant analysis in response to our second question about how specific priorities for addressing policy coherence across sport and particular SDGs may be determined. The importance of making context-specific determination of development needs was identified in our first, education-orientated example, in which we recognised the extent to which country-specific leadership and ownership is embedded in the *2030 Agenda*. A further specific consideration raised both through the education and health examples was the importance of rigorous identification of potential ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ causal chains which may facilitate and enhance the utility of sport in respect of different SDGs and Targets. We would, therefore, continue to support Coalter (2010, 2013), Jeanes and Lindsey (2014) and others who emphasise the importance of evidence-based understanding of ‘mechanisms’ by which sport may have particular impacts, and this is well aligned with recommendations regarding policy coherence more generally (Barry et al., 2010; King, 2016)

Nevertheless, our policy coherence-related examples also demonstrate that consideration of evidence and potential causal chains must also take into account policy and organisational particularities within other development sectors, as well as within sport, as they vary at different scales and in different contexts. All stakeholders that have relevance for progress towards policy coherence have their own interests that may or may not be served in seeking to align sport with particular SDGs and Targets. This may be most obvious in our migration example but also applies more widely as indicated, for example, by the significance of policy makers in education and urban planning for enabling policy coherence

in respect of participation-level sport and non-communicable diseases. These and other groups of stakeholders hold power to impede policy coherence as much as they may, alternatively, support it. Ultimately, therefore, the feasibility of enhancing policy coherence depends on intrinsically political processes (Nilsson et al., 2012).

We would also advocate that analysis oriented by and towards policy coherence should support identification of the limits of any potential contributions of sport to sustainable development. Through the three examples, we have identified that the possibilities of policy coherence across sport and the SDGs can be significantly constrained by structural inequalities, that can be variably present across different levels and in different contexts. We acknowledge those critiques of the conceptualisation of sustainable development in the *2030 Agenda* that suggest that it may be insufficiently radical to transform structural inequalities, given their basis in entrenched global neoliberal policies (e.g. Deacon, 2016; Spangenberg, 2017). As such, we recognise that enhancing policy coherence with some particular SDGs and Targets may only serve to further the association between sport, development and the global neoliberal project that critical scholars have noted (Hayhurst, 2009; Darnell, 2012). Awareness of the potential that policy coherence could be undesirable in particular cases and circumstances is, therefore, important (Thede, 2013).

These considerations also lead us to advocate for the importance and value of continued academic engagement with the concept of policy coherence, not least as it may contribute to addressing some limitations within the literature on SDP. In the introduction, we recognised a paradox in respect of the positioning of sport as a cross-cutting tool across different development agendas and the concurrent emphasis given by some researchers to examining its contribution to discrete and specific objectives. Future research orientated towards policy coherence would not eschew the need for specificity in the consideration of particular potential impacts of sport, but would enable integrated analysis that recognises how

any such impacts may be enabled or constrained by interconnections across different development agendas, sectors and contexts. Such analysis would also contribute to bridging, what Darnell et al. (2017) recently termed, a ‘divide’ between two principle strands of SDP research that respectively emphasise positivistic, evidence-based approaches to improving SDP and critical recognition of structural constraints on the possibilities of SDP. Elsewhere, the first author has argued for greater use of political science and policy analysis theories to further understand the nuanced ways in which evidence, structural influences as well as other factors may combine to influence SDP policy and practice (Jeanes and Lindsey, 2014). That such factors have been a feature of each of our three examples demonstrates that the concept of policy coherence, in particular, has potential value in addressing the divide identified by Darnell et al. (2017).

Nevertheless, we acknowledge once more that neither our three selected examples nor their exposition in this article should be considered as exhaustive. Further desk research would be beneficial to begin consideration of the extent of existing (in)coherence between specific sport-related policies and other SDGs beyond those explored in this article. Empirical studies that deepen understanding of interlinkages and inconsistencies between sport and SDGs in particular locales and contexts is also and especially required. We urge other researchers, as well as policy makers and practitioners, to take up this mantle given the importance of such analysis at a time when sport has found itself more strongly positioned within global development policy than ever before.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We recognise that the terminology of global South and global North can be contentious in subsuming multiple layers of complexity into a geographical dichotomy. Nevertheless, this terminology remains commonly and pertinently used in development studies and is most relevant to many of the issues in the paper. We acknowledge that other terminology categorising countries by income can also often be used, particularly in relation to issues of health that are considered later in the paper.

<sup>2</sup> This acronym represents these authors' chosen terminology of 'sport for development'. We use Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) in this article as its wider conception is better aligned with the scope of the 2030 Agenda.

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